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WASHINGTON

Barbie-American

Attorney General William French Smith today named Allan Ryan to head an investigation into the relationship between former Gestapo officer Klaus Barbie and the U.S. government.

Ryan, director of the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations (OSI), will look into reports that Barbie, 69, received U.S. aid in eluding French authorities who sought to try him for his role of Gestapo chief in Lyons, France, from 1942 to 1944.

Barbie, known as the "butcher of Lyons," was twice convicted in absentia by French courts on war crimes charges in the 1950s.

He was expelled from Bolivia and returned to France last month to face another trial for alleged wartime mass murders.

Ryan met with reporters today and declined to reveal what evidence a preliminary investigation had uncovered. But he released copies of documents which indicated Barbie made four brief visits to the United States in 1969 and 1970.

Several members of Congress have pressed Smith to open an investigation into reports that U.S. intelligence may have helped Barbie escape to Bolivia in 1951 in return for intelligence information which he may have supplied to them.

Ryan, 37, said he hoped to wind up the investigation in three months and suggested he might ask both the Bolivian and French governments for cooperation in the matter.

He also said he might seek to question Barbie himself, although he did not know whether the French government would cooperate in this.

"Talking to Barbie would certainly be high on the list of considerations," he said.

Ryan repeatedly refused to characterize any evidence that the preliminary investigation might have uncovered except to say there was no firm indication yet of any link between Barbie and American intelligence.

Smith said Ryan would take leave of absence from the OSI, which has been hunting down suspected former Nazi war criminals in the United States, to head the Barbie investigation.

"This announcement should not be taken as confirming the allegations that have recently been made," Smith said.

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"But we have seen enough to convince us that the charges that the United States utilized Barbie for intelligence purposes after World War II and later assisted in his escape to Bolivia cannot be dismissed and that a full investigation would be appropriate."

Ryan told reporters today that Barbie made his apparent brief trips to the United States under an "A-2" classification from the Bolivian government.

"It was clearly more than a tourist passport," he said.

He said he had been assigned two assistants, a lawyer and an historian, and told reporters he was seeking records from the Defense and Justice Departments as well as the Central Intelligence Agency.

Any Justice Department information, he said, would include information from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

"I assume that since it is a full investigation I will have subpoena powers," he said.

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